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Book Review by Sophal Ear of: Book review of Dependent Communities: Aid and Politics in Cambodia and East written by Caroline Hughes



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***Dependent Communities: Aid and Politics in Cambodia and East Timor.* By Caroline Hughes. Ithaca, New York: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2009. Softcover: 265pp.**

This is the first book to attempt a comparison of Cambodia and Timor-Leste (East Timor) since Noam Chomsky's and Edward Herman's duets *After the Cataclysm: Postwar Indochina and the Reconstruction of Imperial Ideology* (South End Press 1979) and *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (Pantheon Books 1988), neither of which were dedicated studies of comparative analysis nor particularly notable for their objectivity.

In contrast, Hughes has managed to cram an incredible amount of knowledge into 265 pages, regaling us with the most fascinating details in her pursuit of three contentions. First, that "international intervention, for all its claims to protect, reconstruct, and reconcile, appears from the perspective of people in war-torn and aid-dependent societies as remote, unfathomable, and coercive, and, as such, beyond the purview of any national public sphere that might conceivably be constructed" (p. 21). Second, that "international interveners and aid donors promote a politics that is confining, in that it attempts to resurrect borders that will contain potentially unruly populations, and atomizing, in the sense that it seeks specifically to break down non-state authority structures regarded as the source of such unruliness and focuses on the individual and individual action, rather than upon the public sphere and the fostering of collective action" (ibid) and third that "the state's legitimacy deficit leads to demands for more intimate relations of dependence with those who clearly control the power and the money — the donors themselves" (p. 22).

As a serious comparative analysis of Cambodia and Timor-Leste, it is a most welcome contribution to both the comparative literature of Southeast Asia and the post-conflict transitional literature. Among the most internationally intervened countries in the world, Cambodia and Timor-Leste offer great insight into the politics of transition, international intervention and aid dependence. Moreover, both countries share extensive historical similarities: they transitioned from conflict, were subjected to United Nations intervention (some would argue tutelage), are democratizing states and of course are highly aid-dependent.

The book's primary strength is its meticulous historical detail, particularly in the later empirical chapters (Chapter 7 in particular stood out for me). Hughes' extensive fieldwork in, and intimate

knowledge of, both countries is obvious. As someone who has conducted extensive research on Cambodia, and who worked in Timor-Leste in 2002–03, I felt privileged as one of only a handful of individuals who could really appreciate Hughes' gargantuan effort in comparing the two countries across so many different facets and dimensions.

This is not a book for fans of neoliberalism or the Washington Consensus. Indeed, while Hughes attacks the neoliberal order, it is not entirely clear who the enemy really is, as she shadowboxes neoliberalism here and there, by building a straw man only to tear him down from one chapter to the next. The effort to embed Cambodia and Timor-Leste in the dependency and globalization literature enjoys mixed results. According to Hughes, the international community is both a contributor and a hindrance to development. To be sure, this point is well taken and valid. But as Hughes correctly points out, in both Cambodia and Timor-Leste, exogenous forces are as much to blame as domestic actors for destabilizing these respective countries prior to and during their transitions. Moreover, while the international community has contributed indirectly to the stunting of political and civic engagement, the issue is not as black and white as Hughes too often seems to suggest. While I do not believe that Hughes places blame solely on the international community, one cannot help but get this impression.

Other minor criticisms (if they can even be called that) include the occasionally frustrating switching back and forth between Cambodia and Timor-Leste as uneven with too much on one country and vice-versa (pp. 26–32): six pages on Cambodia's war background (pp. 32–45), 13 pages on Timor's. Similarities can feel contrived. Differences are not entirely clear. In addition, a better summing-up of each chapter would have recapped the main takeaways. While chapter introductions typically worked by explaining to the reader what Hughes planned, their endings sometimes felt rushed if not altogether truncated. The same applies to the final chapter which does not revisit the three contentions raised in the introduction.

While I cannot say that Hughes has really made any erratas, as the breadth of her knowledge is exceptionally deep, one bone of contention I proffer involves a historical account of the Khmer word *Yuon*, an oft-derogatory xenonym for Vietnamese people, in the context of "*yuon*-TAC", as the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) "peacekeeping mission was dubbed by the border resistance parties" (p. 30). I read this with immediate skepticism, because it seemed totally uncharacteristic of the resistance

parties as a whole to attack their patron saint and benefactor, UNTAC, in this way. Indeed, the use of the term *Yuon-TAC* appears to have been isolated to the Khmer Rouge portion of the resistance, otherwise known as the Democratic Party of Kampuchea (PDK). Steve Heder, who was Deputy Director of UNTAC's Information/Education Division, writes in his edited volume with Judy Ledgerwood, *Propaganda, Politics, and Violence in Cambodia* (M.E. Sharpe 1995): "Increasingly, PDK propaganda poured vitriol about UNTAC — which it called 'Yuon-TAC'— to supplement its rabid rhetoric against the Yuon and SOC [State of Cambodia]" (p. 66). Penny Edwards, who worked as an UNTAC Information Officer, makes the same assertion in the preceding chapter to Heder's: "The PDK further alleged that UNTAC was colluding with the Vietnamese, that UNTAC was really *Yuon-tac* and that it was in Cambodia to bring about the final annexation of Cambodia to Vietnam through UNTAC support of the 'puppet' SOC regime" (p. 32). This suggests that the term (*yuon-TAC*, *Yuon-TAC*, or *Yuon-tac*, however capitalized, but always italicized) was used by the Khmer Rouge — hardly "the border resistance parties" (which included the Khmer People's National Liberation Front and the royalist Funcinpec).

These are truly negligible oversights in an otherwise terribly impressive and ambitious book. Overall, Hughes' contribution is certain to become a definitive work of the comparative politics of Southeast Asian post-conflict reconstruction and aid dependence.